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# Schemas

Jennifer G. Yerdon  
*West Virginia University*

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# **Schemas**

Jennifer G. Yerdon

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Creative Arts  
At West Virginia University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In  
Painting

Paul Krainak, MFA, Chair  
Alison Helm  
Bill Thomas  
Naijun Zhang

Morgantown, West Virginia  
2005

Keywords: Perception, Object, Map, Space

## **Abstract**

### **Schemas**

**Jennifer G. Yerdon**

The work included in my MFA thesis exhibition entitled Schemas, represent the relationship that objects have to the body via perception. They become a map of understanding that is at once the object and the experience of that things objectness. Strategically composed this experience is translated into texture, color, and pattern. In this thesis statement I will address how we understand objects in the world and the importance of our interaction with said objects. In addition I will discuss the map like processes that I employ to create these works. I will also discuss the influential artists and writings that deal with similar themes.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my parents Everett and Delores Yerdon and my family for their unconditional support. Without you the last eight years would not have been as successful. Thank you to my graduate committee Bill Thomas, Alison Helm, Naijun Zhang, and especially to Paul Krainak for your constant advice, support, and faith, while pursuing my M.F.A. degree in painting. Your superior knowledge and guidance is greatly appreciated.

## **Introduction**

The paintings included in "Schemas" represent a way of understanding objects. They are my identifications, a form of organization that occurs in perceptual experience that exists between subject and object, person and thing, creating an environment we experience and that which we call world. To understand our being in the world we must investigate our organization of the constituent components of the world. In this body of work I authenticate forms that are a visual representation of both the perceptual and conceptual understanding of objects in the world. They act as a bridge between seeing and naming an object. Any engaging object of interest could be included into this category. For this particular series of paintings the machinery represented are disconnected from their intended use and they become an intricate map of repeated color fields and patterns. At the same time their immensity and purpose as working units remains.

## **Perception of Space and Object**

The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things--but the oddest part of it all was that, whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty, though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold.

-Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

Lewis Carroll invented and wrote fantastic stories about the adventures of a little girl named Alice. In her youthful rambles, Alice was able to step through a looking glass and consort with mystical creatures in places that only exist in a child's imagination. In the above quote Carroll provides the reader with a sense that Alice is in the midst of organizing her environment in relationship to the objects that seem to become manifest only when her attention is diverted away from them. In this sense Alice can only come to a perceptual understanding of her world through peripheral experience. She is



unable to grasp these objects in their entirety with only a first impression. They leap from view unwilling to be read as object or of having an existence whatsoever. Alice's situation is not unique only to her, traipsing through a wall mirror on a quest to find adulthood. It is a way of understanding the world in which we exist as physical and sentient beings. Her search then becomes a way of piecing together information that is a combination of sensory perception and thought processes. My current body of work strives to reach the same goals. The images created in these pieces offer a way of arranging an image so that the viewer can glimpse an act of organization of objects, which occurs while looking.

To comprehend existence we must investigate our organization of that which becomes part of the make up or a component of the world. Anything could be included into this category that we find close at hand or ready for our immediate use or understanding. More broadly, anything that we find ourselves faced with that becomes a point of interest, as it is an object that we can engage with can fall into this category. For example, at the moment I am engaged with the monitor of my computer in the same way as

Alice was engaged with the objects on the shelf when she stepped into the shop. These objects must have a bodily relationship to me in order for them to become part of my concern and thus part of what I define as world. For my computer this relationship is based on my knowledge and understanding that when I press a key the letter is displayed as a character on the monitor that I can read and has a particular meaning when it is associated with other like characters. I recognize the symbol of the key pressed and am able to read it's meaning as part of the monitor-object through my past and current relationship with it regardless of the message that it may be spelling. However, the way in which this character interacts with other characters on the screen is also important. It must fall into my understanding of an alphabetical organization that makes sense in regard to the language that I speak and the characters that I most generally utilize. If the character did not meet these requirements we would be left with adklsd;fklej, and although we can identify individual symbols with in this configuration or composition, it holds little meaning to what the grouping symbolizes or how it relates to the small world which surrounds it.

In his essay "The Primacy of Perception", M. Merleau-Ponty explains how we experience objects in our world.

Merleau-Ponty believes that perception is an essential element to the understanding of consciousness that cannot be found through a classical investigation of form and matter, as though there is something else, intangible, to explaining the world. He writes, "Matter is "pregnant" with its form, which is to say that in the final analysis every perception takes place within a certain horizon (span of time) and ultimately in the "world"."<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty describes experience as existing in action, that there is no full stop recognition of each particle of time. He believes that experience of the world is based on perception in that it gives us an order that is omnipresent.

Merleau-Ponty also addresses the possibility of hidden sides that each three-dimensional object contains and the way these sides present themselves to the viewer.<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty suggests that the hidden sides of objects exist through a presence not in the sense that they fit into an equation but into a proximity to the perceiver. You may in a sense reach out and touch the object, hold it. Perception of an object is not about an intellectual synthesis that would classify the experience of hidden

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<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, "The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences." In *The Phenomenology Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2002, 436.

<sup>2</sup> (437)

sides as possible. The object exists in the world, in front of us, ready to be experienced from multiple perspectives. "[I]t is given as the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views in each of which the object is given but in none of which it is given exhaustively."<sup>3</sup> In a sense the addition of these multiple perspectives hold a greater relationship to the object than the entire object itself. An example of this can also be found in *The Primacy of Perception* also by Merleau-Ponty. Here, Merleau-Ponty describes what it is like to know a world that is mediated by signs such as maps in relationship to knowing the geography of countryside.<sup>4</sup> Mapping experiences of the world or objects are not fully recognized through objective order. Natives to the Marshall Islands East of the Philippines have used this technique to travel from island to island through their study of ocean swells. "Vast distances separate islands from each other and their low elevation makes it difficult to sight land. The original settlers of the Marshall Islands developed skills to maintain travel between the islands. They learned to read the formation of waves by watching for certain swells which would show the direction

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<sup>3</sup> (438)

<sup>4</sup> Edie, James M. ed., The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics, Northwestern University Press, 1964, 162.

in which land lay." (Coverdell)<sup>5</sup> As in being able to pick up a pen it is much smoother to reach adjust your finger width and pick up the object then to describe each incremental movement it takes to execute the task. Merleau-Ponty states, "Perception is here understood as a reference to a whole which can be grasped, in principle, only through certain of its parts or aspects."<sup>6</sup> There are moments of perceiving objects, which require large portions of what is already known in the mind and also portions which contain more than what we can call adumbrational<sup>7</sup> moments.

Author Yi-Fu Tuan also writes about how we deal with perception in his book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*.<sup>8</sup> Here Tuan deals with space as measured by man and his body. Having an understanding for surrounding space includes our biological needs and social relations. It can be applied to how one approaches a room or understands the front and back of a city layout. He feels that without relationship to the body we lack coordinates that allow us to create place.

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<sup>5</sup> Coverdell, Paul D.  
<http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/guides/marshallislands/misticks.html>  
(December 11, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, "The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences." In *The Phenomenology Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2002, 439.

<sup>7</sup> Adumbration: the act of providing vague advance indications; representing beforehand

<sup>8</sup> Tuan, Yi-Fu, *Space and Place The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis, 1977.

Commanding our environment the body can be seen as an object and stand in relation to the objects around us. However, we become spatially lost when the surrounding environment has no relation to the physicality of our body. We must feel that there are relative positions in space between said objects and the body. For example, we must associate a left, right, front, and back when confronting objects in space. Here Tuan quotes Kant saying, "...our geographical knowledge, and even our commonest knowledge of the position of places, would be of no aid to us if we could not by reference to the sides of our bodies, assign to regions the things so ordered and the whole system of mutually relative positions." If walking on a path in the woods one should step off into an unmarked territory little has changed except an orientation. Trees still surround us but suddenly front and back associations feel arbitrary. Introduce a flicker of light and the forest has radically regained its structure. With a goal in mind one is able to stride toward the light putting the darkness behind and not wander left or right of the destination.<sup>9</sup>

With this observation in mind Tuan concludes that our understanding and perception of space is experientially schematic. Traveling through a building may be very

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<sup>9</sup> (36)

different for different people. The student walking to class may first encounter a building's lobby, hallway, and classroom, where as maintenance persons may enter the building through a back door into a boiler room and dark passageways.<sup>10</sup> The Student and Janitor's experience example two very different interpretations of the same building. The same may be said in regard to the compositions that I organize through the use of a point and shoot camera, projection, and the medium of oil paint.

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<sup>10</sup> (41)

## Schemas

In my current body of work images are composed in a way that allows the viewer to make associations between the final painted product, the subject, and the way in which we understand the subject in our surroundings. Merleau-Ponty writes, "The painter "takes his body with him," says Valery. Indeed we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the work that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body-not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement."<sup>11</sup> Each painting's final composition is the end product of a photo-collage, drawing, and a projection onto canvas. To start each painting I gather a group of images by shooting photographs of particular objects. While I am shooting, the interaction of my body and the object becomes ever apparent. The objects I use are large and have an over whelming power compared to the size

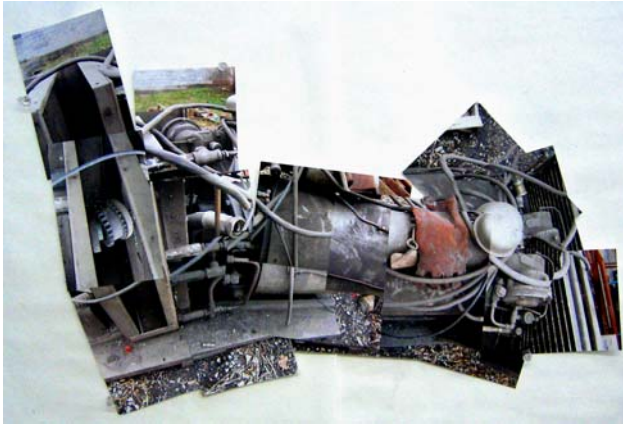
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<sup>11</sup> Edie, James M. ed., The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics, Northwestern University Press, 1964, 162.



of the body and it is not unlikely that I find myself stepping around the object in large intervals and over debris that lay on the ground. Each shot is not only about the object being perceived it is also about that action of stepping around the object. The manner in which each photograph is framed is also important. Each shot is taken so that most or the entire frame is filled with the object. The camera is not moved until it is ready for the next shot and is then only shifted slightly in one direction so that the frame may overlap or align itself with the previous frame. Looking through the viewfinder of the camera, it becomes an extension of my eye and a frame for my visual understanding of the object in its entirety. I often find myself physically as well as mentally involved with the object when I am inclined to step onto or into it. When this happens I find myself apprehending the physical immensity of the object outside of the viewfinder through the knowledge I have gained from previous clicks of the shutter. Only after all of the images have been developed am I able to begin to layout a composition of what this experience of the object can mean visually.

With all of the images developed I arrange them into a photo-collage that reassembles the subject. Each photograph is aligned with the succeeding photograph so that the total image nearly reconstructs



the subject. If it happens that while shooting, the viewfinder was not moved far enough in between frames so

that a sequential photo's image is overly similar to a previous photo the image is set aside and replaced with another image that is the product of a more drastic shift. The images are then arranged according to how separate elements in each image match.

Individual parts of the subject become more apparent and hold more visual weight in the photo, such as hoses, bolts, levers, steering wheels, and panels. Often these elements become the shapes that connect each individual photograph in the photo-collage.

After the photo-collage is adhered together I Xerox the image duplicating its actual size. During this part of my process, the colors in the image are

broken down into a scale of gray and black tones. These colors are much more simple than the bright colors often found in the actual photo-collage. They work themselves into the final paintings as muted and flat passages of color which allow smaller areas of bright color to be easily read. The individual shapes also become more abbreviated through the Xerox copies. Areas of intricate detail become more simple geometric shapes also used in the final compositions.

After the image has been Xeroxed, I make a tracing to create a pencil line drawing. Done on drafting velum that has a transparent quality, the final image of the drawing resembles a topographic map of the original image. The quality of the pencil line



is similar to that found on a map and the organic shapes usually found within the subject resemble roadways and land masses.

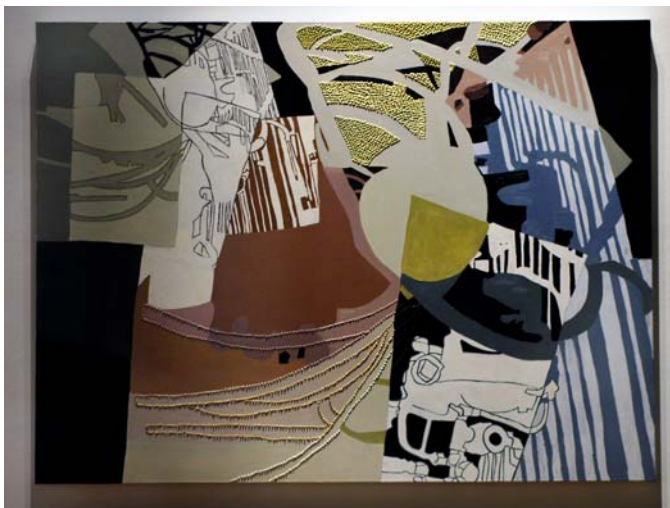
In addition, I also start to incorporate the manufactured edge of the photo-collage.

The edge of the individual photograph is approximately three inches by five inches in size but is altered by the multiple edges of the layered photographs. The end result is a photo-collage that is anywhere from eight by ten to twenty four by twelve depending on the number of photographs included. The edge of each collage is different and varies in shape. Each collage possesses its own unique arrangement of rectangular edges that interact to form an irregular containment edge. In the line drawings this acts in two different map-like ways. For the process, this means that the image is now infused with a grid system that allows the eye to section out individual portions of the entire composition. Over all, the image begins to take on the feel of a body of land that has been singled out from its surrounding masses.

Next the image is projected onto a canvas in preparation for a final painting. During this process the image undergoes yet another transformation. While it has been thought of as an extension of the body in a representation of experience or place in the collage, a broken down and simplified image in the Xerox and line drawing, it now becomes a mixture of

the two for its final composition. While the image is being projected onto the canvas I choose a composition that becomes an arrangement that I can identify with on both psychological and physiological levels. I choose a composition that for me embodies both that which is the object of the subject and the subject of place in which the object can be found.

Through the process of painting this culminates in areas of each painting having various painterly qualities. Some areas hold color that is local to the photo-collage and some are painted in more broad flat colors. In yet other areas thin washes are applied to give the illusion of depth but are negated through the inclusion of line work, similar to that of the pencil drawings. Next to the modeled passages the areas filled in with more flat and often muted colors again take on the quality of maps that are situated in a



more open and breathable space than the line drawings. To add to this flatness I use patterns to

draw the viewer's eyes to the surface quality and quantity of paint in each painting. I feel that the most successful patterns are the ones that are incorporated into the flat areas but also have a perspectival element such as in "20XJ" where bands of thin white and cool blue sit in the right of the canvas and behind a detailed line. These lines run from the lower to upper right corners leaning ever so slightly to the middle. These patterns are both added before the application of paint with thick gesso and also after with quantities of oil paint. In the lower and upper middle of "20XJ" tiny pearls of color dot the canvas in both a line and filled in surface.

The final compositions that make up each painting become for me a representation of both a sensory or perceptual and conceptual integration of thought processes.



For example in the fragmented surface of "169BU-SST" there is the feeling of

both the object's hoses, grates, air filters, and engines while at the same time a sense of these things whirring and

whirling around in the space they occupy. The combined result of which is a simulated experience of this object.

This is also exemplified in the wall drawing included on the back wall of the Laura Mesaros Gallery. Drawing T-ST-131 stretched across the back of the gallery wall measuring approximately ten by twelve feet and was composed of three different line drawings. Within its composition the viewer was able to gather the general feel of an architectural machined space where gears moved and air



blew. Its sheer immensity gave it the possibility of entrance while at the same time its fluid line and divided shapes remained a reference to a large

mapped area.

Regarding the work's relationship to map like qualities the show was given the title "Schemas". Not only does a schema represent a way of imposing a pattern into complex reality or experience but it also deals with the way experience is mediated and interpreted. Just as Tuan's woodland wanderer needs an orientation to understand

direction so to do we need a way of seeing to understand objects.



## Influential Artists

During the process of creating work for "Schemas" I was influenced by many artists and artists' writings. These artists create paintings that are not only similar to mine in form but also in content. They speak about their work as being a way of mapping space, objects, and places. Beyond a formal critique of this world some feel that their work creates a new environment by over laying multiple images and associating happenings to individual works.

Historically, the work of Stuart Davis has helped me not only to develop a sense of color and color relationships but also to consider how to paint the divisions of space included in each composition. Working



from the 1930's to the early 1960's Davis became one of the pioneers of American paintings that were concerned with representing a way of seeing and interpreting

realistic subject matter. His paintings are a conglomeration of street scenes and still lifes that have been fragmented into geometric experiences. Of his own

work Davis states that the subject for him is about the continuous increase in speed of communication in the form of experience. "Today the visualization of an image which would express the content of an artist's thought about what things are, what the visual character of the subject matter of his thoughts was at any time, is a multifaceted affair. We have information about events all the world over practically instantaneously with their happening. We have it by the written word, by ear, and even visually, at almost the time of the event itself."<sup>12</sup> Davis goes on to describe how he implements this outlook onto the canvas. In his very methodical way he first addresses the emotional reaction he might have to a subject matter then an analysis of its elements and executes the whole painting with a workmanlike approach.

Diane Kelder feels that this way of painting also allows Davis to have an expert handling of the way in which he paints. "After he was satisfied that the "all-over configuration... reached a degree of complexity and completeness satisfactory to the impulse that initiated it," Davis added color."<sup>13</sup> Each color is applied in a flat even application sometimes with a palette knife to attract

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<sup>12</sup> Kelder, Diane, ed. Stuart Davis, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1971, 146.

<sup>13</sup> (11)

the viewers attention to the over all surface, color, and texture of the painting.

Working more recently, painters Mathew Ritchie and Julie Mehretu both speak about their work in relationship to the inter workings of viewer and experience. Ritchie sees his work as a peek into another world where several characters interact with one another to form different situations that play themselves out on the canvas, gallery wall and floor through intricate line work and bright



chaotic colors. His own systematic way of working also resembles map-making in his paring of characters and color representation. In everyday maps the colors

are very muted to keep the information on them readable.

If the colors are too bright or work against each other's harmony then the over all concept of the map may be lost on the viewer. To make his paintings visually interesting and not "totally legible to any person" Ritchie looks for color

combinations that are slightly confusing and not completely ordered.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise the work of Mehretu also displays a world where there is order and chaos made from color shards and whip-like lines that are layered across her canvases. As



a representation of both social and psychological processes, Mehretu's layers allude to blueprints, buildings, and battlefields. They become a cyclical mass of marks that seem to be

about explosions, implosions, ascension and dissent, destruction, and creation all at once. Recently included in the Carnegie International Mehretu's work is described as exhibiting an interest in "multifaceted layers of place, space, and time that impact the formation of personal and communal identity."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Herbert, Lynn M., *Matthew Ritchie Proposition Player*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, Houston, Texas, 2004, 44.

<sup>15</sup> Hoptman, Laura. *Carnegie International 2004-5*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, 2004, 188.

## Conclusion

The present body of work is a combination of ideas that revolve around representation and abstraction. Each painting is my interpretation of how we experience objects. The compositions are based on map like schemas and are consciously and meticulously laid out in a series of steps. Each step involves a number of decisions, each of which adds a new layer of information to the painting and reinforces the end image.

Much like the work of the artists who have influenced me I am concerned with compositional complexity, one that will point to my subject as well as the way in which we perceive the object. This process is a series of steps, both figurative and literal, generally made up of fragments that ultimately coalesce. The act of seeing and putting these fragments together to understand the function, sound, and perceptual experience of each painting is the basis of the work. The meaning of the work hovers between viewer and object.

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2003 Chautauqua Institution Summer Art Program, Chautauqua  
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2001 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Studio Art, Painting, Art History, The  
College of Saint Rose, Albany, New York  
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**Teaching Experience**

2003- present Graduate Teaching Assistant, Drawing I, Two Dimensional  
Foundations, (Instructor of Record)  
West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia  
Adjunct Summer Faculty, Painting I, West Virginia University,  
Morgantown, West Virginia  
2002 Graduate Teaching Assistant, Art History, West Virginia  
University, Morgantown, West Virginia  
2000 Third Grade Art Teacher, Ten-Week Art Curriculum, (Instructor of  
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Albany, New York

**Grants, Awards**

2002-present Graduate Assistantship and Tuition Waiver, College of  
Creative Arts, West Virginia University,  
Morgantown, West Virginia  
2005 College of Creative Arts Student Travel Grant, West Virginia  
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Tuition Scholarship, Chautauqua School of Art Summer Program,  
Chautauqua Institution,  
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1997-2001 Rooney Gibbons Scholarship, The College of Saint Rose,  
Albany, New York  
Clark Foundation Scholarship, The Clark Foundation, Cooperstown,  
New York

**Exhibitions (\*Solo Shows)**

- 2005 \*MFA Thesis Exhibition, College of Creative Arts, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia
- 2004 "Graduate Student Exhibition", Laura Messaros Gallery, College of Creative Arts, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia  
National Small Oil Painting Exhibition, Wichita Center for the Arts, Wichita, Kansas  
"Elephant Market", Alternative Space, Morgantown, West Virginia  
\*Black Bear Restaurant, Morgantown, West Virginia  
Blue Moose Café, Morgantown, West Virginia
- 2003 "Graduate Student Exhibition", Mountainlair Gallery, West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia  
Chautauqua School of Art Summer Program, Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua, New York
- 2001 The College of Saint Rose Undergraduate Art Exhibition, The College of Saint Rose, Albany, New York  
The College of Saint Rose Advanced Painting and Drawing Art Exhibition, The College of Saint Rose, Albany, New York

#### **Curatorial Experience**

- 2001 Coordinator/Curator, The College of Saint Rose Advanced Painting and Drawing Art Exhibition  
The College of Saint Rose, Albany, New York  
Curatorial Duties, Co-Chair, The College of Saint Rose Senior Art Exhibition, The College of Saint Rose, Albany, New York

#### **Association Memberships**

- 2005 College Art Association Member  
College Art Association Annual Conference, Atlanta, Georgia
- 2004 College Art Association Annual Conference, Seattle, Washington

#### **Volunteer**

- 2002 Albany Institute of History and Art, Albany, New York
- 2000-2001 The College of Saint Rose Freshman Orientation Fall, The College of Saint Rose, Albany, New York



## Jennifer Yerdon

### Skills

Painting: oil and acrylic medium  
Life Drawing  
Two Dimensional Foundations  
Silk Screen  
Intaglio  
Black/White Photography

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Microsoft Works  
Netscape/Explorer  
PC/Mac Experience

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